Aust. Educ. Res. (2016) 43:1–13
DOI 10.1007/s13384-015-0195-y

Introduction

Think tanks, edu-businesses and education policy: issues of evidence, expertise and influence

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Received: 11 November 2015 / Accepted: 23 November 2015 / Published online: 17 December 2015
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Abstract This paper conceptualises think tanks and edu-businesses in relation to education policy work in the Australian polity. It situates the enhanced influence of both in relation to the restructured state, which has lost some key capacities in relation to the generation of research and ideas for policy. This restructuring has been strongly influenced by the techniques of new public management, the auditing of education through national and international testing and new forms of network governance, which have opened up spaces for the increased influence of think tanks and edu-businesses across the policy cycle in education. We see here the workings of a 'polycentric state'. The paper also considers changing concepts of 'evidence', 'expertise' and 'influence' in respect of the involvement of think tanks and edu-businesses in circulating policy ideas and affecting policy development in Australian education. This introduction to this special issue of *The Australian Educational Researcher* serves as a provocation to further research on this new policy scenario.

Keywords Think tanks · Edu-businesses · Restructured state · Evidence · Expertise · Influence

Introduction

The past decade has seen policy think tanks and edu-businesses assume significant roles in shaping and generating debates about Australian education policy. The increased influence of these organisations in Australian education mirrors

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experiences in the USA and UK, where non-government organisations are wielding increasing influence over policy development and enactment processes (Ball and Junemann 2012; Medvetz 2012; Reckhow 2013). The rise of think tanks and edu-businesses is symbolic of new and complex forms of governance, characterised by the formation of new policy networks and communities of expertise, new transnational policy discourses and new knowledge flows (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Ball 2012). These new forms of governance pose complex questions about how we understand the nature and role of 'the state' in education policy production, as an increased plurality of actors and organisations seeks to exert influence over political and policy processes. As the work of government actors and organisations intersects with these new actors, interests and forms of expertise, new forms of hybridity are emerging in the development of policy ideas and in the kinds of policy 'solutions' produced in response to perceived policy problems.

We must stress from the outset that think tanks come in all shapes, sizes and political persuasions. This is also true of edu-businesses. For example, while there is often a tendency to frame think tanks as representing 'the Right' of politics, a number of Australian think tanks claim to be 'Centrist' or 'Left' in terms of political persuasion. What interests us, and motivates this special issue, is that regardless of political persuasion, think tanks and edu-businesses are playing increasingly prominent roles in Australian education policy and governance, and this justifies a critical examination of such roles. We are also interested in how networks of non-government actors and organisations are connected in multiple and often complex ways to government agencies, and how these linkages may then be used to leverage power and influence. Our interest lies, therefore, not only in understanding how think tanks and edu-businesses seek to exert influence on governments, but also in how various 'cross-pollinations' between think tanks, edu-businesses and governments work to influence all aspects of the policy cycle, from agenda setting and generation of research and ideas for policy, through to policy text production, policy implementation and evaluation (Ball 2012). As several papers in this issue suggest, both think tanks and edu-businesses are flourishing in Australian policy because these organisations are successfully responding to new logics and conditions of possibility for governance, in which 'the restructured state' is being re-positioned as simply one actor amongst many in new polycentric networks (see Ball and Junemann 2012).

Conceptualising think tanks and edu-businesses

While edu-businesses are easier to define, as for-profit entities operating in expanding education markets and as contractors for various government services, think tanks are much more difficult to delineate. As evidenced by the papers in this issue, the term 'think tank' is often a slippery one, manifesting a variety of different characteristics, attributes and political perspectives. In our view, it is futile to seek to isolate 'the' characteristics that ultimately define think tanks, because think tanks come in so many shades and varieties, and are also constantly evolving in response to changing political conditions. Some think tanks, for example, have strong links to

universities, whereas others maintain more independence. Some think tanks operate more like lobby groups, whereas others are difficult to distinguish from consultancy firms. Hart and Vromen (2008) suggest a simple categorisation of Australian think tanks as 'academic think tanks', 'government think tanks', 'contract research think tanks' and 'policy advocacy think tanks' (pp. 136–137). McGann and Weaver (2000) in the US context also distinguish between 'academic', 'contract', 'advocacy' and 'political party' think tanks. Hart and Vromen (2008) suggest policy advocacy think tanks, which seem to be the most visible in Australia, tend to be 'ideologically driven' and 'devote at least as much attention to dissemination and marketing ideas as producing them' (p. 136).

A useful way to conceptualise the nature and role of think tanks is to work with Ball's (2012) view of these groups as part of new 'policy assemblages' operating 'in a new type of policy space… in and beyond the traditional sites and circulations of policymaking' (p. 10). Within these new policy assemblages, think tanks work as policy actors to legitimise and promote specific policy ideas and practices, often aligning with other key actors, including edu-businesses, philanthropic organisations, governments, multilateral agencies, NGOs, consultants, and so on. Another view, which aligns with aspects of Ball's (2012) conceptualisation, is Medvetz's (2012) work on think tanks in the American context. Medvetz frames think tanks as 'boundary organisations' that inhabit unique and intersecting positions between the four 'parent fields' of academia, politics, the market, and the media (p. 18). Drawing upon Bourdieu's theorising of social arrangements as consisting of multiple social fields, each with its own logics of practice overarched by a field of power (see Hilgers & Mangez 2015), Medvetz argues that think tanks gain their distinctiveness from the ability to inhabit a space that simultaneously cuts into and retains distance from each of these four 'parent fields'. Think tanks rely upon each of these fields to gain credibility and power, but must avoid being subsumed into either field in order to retain their distinctiveness and veneer of independence.

Medvetz's conceptualisation of thinks tanks as 'boundary organisations' shares similarities with Lubienski et al. (2011) argument that think tanks, philanthropic groups, policy coalitions and advocacy organisations can be understood as 'intermediary organizations' that work within complex policy networks to assemble, produce and promote evidence tailored for policy makers. Lubienski et al. (2011) document important changes in the funding and work of many think tanks in the US, whereby major philanthropic organisations (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) engage in new forms of 'venture philanthropy' by financially supporting think tanks to pursue work in line with specific agendas. Lubienski et al. (2011) see this as a new focus for philanthropy whereby think tanks are 'orchestrating' rather than producing research knowledge in order to affect policy production. They set this development against the broader growth of private sector interests and influence in US schooling (see Burch 2009). Ball and Exley (2010) have also documented the significance of policy ideas generated by think tanks and policy networks, focussing on the education policy agenda of New Labour in the UK and set against new modes of governance linked to the restructured state.

In Australia, while the impact of new modes of governance has been significant and has helped to enhance *inter alia* the policy impact of think tanks, the extent of

venture philanthropy witnessed in the American context has not yet had the same depth of influence in respect of think tanks and education policy. Nevertheless, the past decade in particular has seen Australian think tanks contribute significantly to education policy debates through generating research papers and reports, opinion pieces in the media, hosting conferences and lectures, and advising policy makers both formally and informally. These think tanks have sought to influence a wide range of education policy areas, particularly 'bright light' national policy initiatives, including: the shape and implementation of the 'Australian Curriculum'; school funding debates associated with the 2011 'Review of School Funding' (the Gonski Review); school autonomy debates such as the federal government's 'Independent Public Schools' initiative; reforms associated with the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN); teacher education and evaluation debates connected to the 'Australian Professional Standards for Teachers', and the recent federal review conducted by the 'Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group'. More recently, the Centre for Independent Studies, a free market think tank, has produced a report (Jha and Buckingham 2015) that provides a review of relevant literature and then proffers support for the introduction of charter schools (i.e. privately managed but government funded schools) and 'for profit' schools in Australia.

In many cases, Australian think tanks have been successful in influencing the nature of debates, demonstrating an exquisite grasp of political timing and an ability to achieve impact through the media when key reports are released. The Grattan Institute, a centrist 'academic' think tank affiliated with the University of Melbourne, has exerted particular skill in this regard, generating widespread media coverage when members of its 'School Education' program release new reports (see Loughland and Thompson 2015; Gillis et al. 2015). Lingard (2015) explores the work of the Centre for Independent Studies, and Reid (2015) examines the Education Standards Institute, a Melbourne-based education think tank established by Dr Kevin Donnelly and committed to a liberal view of education, and Christian beliefs and values. To provide an international perspective, Savage (2015) and Lubienski et al. (2015) analyse trends in the USA, exploring the intersection between leading think tanks and philanthropic organisations in the development of policy ideas, research and advocacy.

Hogan (2015) pays specific attention to edu-businesses increasingly embedded in Australian education policy assemblages, with major companies now contracted by governments to perform a range of policy functions. As Hogan outlines, the multi-national education business Pearson now plays a leading role in testing services associated with NAPLAN. Hogan's paper supports Ball's (2012) thesis that think tanks are just one part of a new policy environment, marked by a broader reconfiguration of the state and the relationships states have with citizens. This can be summarised as a shift from government, understood as the judicial and legislative relationship, to governance, understood as a new 'architecture of regulation' which is 'based on interlocking disparate sites in and beyond the state' (Ball 2012, p. 112). Hursh (2016) has also demonstrated the strong hold that Pearson, the world's largest edu-business, has had on schooling in the US state of New York, through contracts

for testing across education, teacher education and teacher performance evaluation, and text book provision.

It is important to acknowledge here that Pearson has as a strategic goal the creation of a global education policy consensus (Hogan et al. 2015). Through talk of 'corporate social responsibility' some edu-businesses such as Pearson assert that they are doing good, as well as making profit. This is what Shamir (2008) refers to as the 'moralisation of the market' in contemporary conditions of policy production. While our focus here is on developed nations, we acknowledge the substantial move of edu-businesses into low-fee, for-profit schooling in the nations of the so-called Global South. In the nations of the Global North, particularly Anglo-American nations, it has been restructured schooling systems where accountability has been reconstituted through top-down, test-based modes of accountability, that have opened up spaces for the work of edu-businesses through the production of tests, data analysis, related support materials and provision of professional development (Lingard et al. 2016).

Evidence, expertise and influence

Despite the growing presence and influence of think tanks and edu-businesses in Australian education, there remains a significant lack of robust critique and examination of the work these organisations do and the potential implications of such work. This is particularly the case regarding think tanks, which remain remarkably under-theorised in Australian education research literature. This is in contrast to the USA, where there has traditionally been a stronger role for think tanks in civil society and where think tank research is more developed. There is also a need for tracing the complex relationships between think tanks, edu-businesses, and a range of other players in education policy, not only links to government actors and organisations, but also philanthropic organisations, universities and non-profit organisations. This special issue represents a 'first step' in tackling this gap in Australian research, contextualised in relation to the US. Collectively, the papers in this issue engage with *three key concerns*:

Evidence

Central to this collection is a concern with the ways think tanks mobilise specific forms and categories of *evidence*, what this evidence is, how evidence is circulated and used, what inferences are drawn from this evidence, and how appropriate the use of evidence by think tanks is in specific contexts. Of key interest are the ways that certain forms of evidence are given legitimacy and circulated as proof for various policy prescriptions and interventions. As Loughland and Thompson (2015) point out, a feature of think tanks is their appeal of deliverology 'to provide policy solutions that are timely, achievable and politically expedient rather than necessarily educationally desirable'. The argument made is that deliverology is a mixed blessing in that while it makes think tanks responsive to current issues, it also mediates against careful and considered understanding of the complexity of issues

and responses. This is linked to the condition of fast policy making (Peck and Theodore 2015). Reid (2015), for example, looks at the way 'school autonomy' is often presented as an undefined good in policy without due attention to the complexity of the research evidence in these debates. Another example of this, canvassed in several papers in this issue, is the uncritical and invalid use of test data from a variety of tests including PISA and NAPLAN. As Gillis et al. (2015) argue, this is particularly true regarding PISA data, where 'the uncertainty surrounding the use of large scale assessment surveys… are not always taken into consideration (either by accident or by design) when used by prominent, high profile agents of change for policy reform purposes'. Their argument is that when these data are used in invalid ways, which pursue pre-existing agendas, think tanks obscure the usefulness of the data.

This issue is also motivated by wariness about the kinds of research think tanks produce, based on international experiences and trends. This is particularly the case in England and the USA, where researchers have raised serious questions about issues of validity, reliability and bias in research produced by major think tanks. While think tanks are responsive to changing policy conditions as traditional authorities 'outsource' policy work to new actors, research from the US and UK suggests a problem associated with an over-emphasis on think tank research. We reiterate the point made by Lingard (2015) that it is the restructured state with its loss of various capacities to produce research and policy ideas, which has enabled the enhanced involvement of edu-businesses and think tanks in the policy cycle in education. While there are overt examples of the regard in which some think tanks appear to be held by governments, what is most interesting in this special issue is to observe the ways think tanks, edu-businesses and the individuals who work for and with them, operate as policy actors in new policy networks. Lingard (2015) speaks of a new category of professional, namely 'the policy expert', who inhabits a new void within contemporary policy networks. This void has been created as governments and bureaucracies have embraced decentralised managerialisms and now outsource research work once done by in-house staff. The policy expert may also be rising in prominence due to an apparent crisis of faith in academics to contribute to policy debates. This is perhaps demonstrated by UK Education Minister Michael Gove's description of academics who disagreed with the policy direction set by the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition Government as 'the Blob, in thrall to Sixties ideologies' that effectively constitute them as enemies of promise.[1].

This opinion is often mirrored in Australia, whereby academics who offer critical analyses of government policies or the work of think tanks (especially politically right-leaning think tanks), are regularly painted as 'left wing ideologues', even when there is no basis in their work to justify such description. Academics may also be failing to adequately influence public debate due to an academic environment that rewards large-scale research grants and publication in high-status journals over engagement in policy debates and development, even though (and somewhat paradoxically) many universities encourage staff to write opinion pieces for the

[1] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/what-is-the-blob-and-why-is-michael-gove-comparing-his-enemies-to-an-unbeatable-sci-fi-mound-of-goo-9115600.html.

media and to engage with policy by producing so-called 'usable' research that lends towards furthering 'best practice'. Academics are under pressure, therefore, to re-position themselves as entrepreneurs of their own ideas, and to borrow from aspects of the think tank method, but suffer from not having time or incentives to engage in policy debates with the speed and agility of policy actors in think tanks.

Expertise

The papers in this issue also consider the significance of think tanks in relation to changing notions of *expertise*. There is, of course, something very interesting about the ways that expertise about education is constructed and legitimised. At the outset, one may expect that in any profession, expertise is an extension of both knowledge and practice. In education, however, this is especially pertinent given that expertise about education is historically considered to reside externally to those who are engaged in the practice of it. Going back to the 1840s in England, for example, Jones (2013) suggests that expertise in education has historically corresponded with dominant social and political logics, and particularly those people external to schools who profess these ideas. Think tanks and edu-businesses are merely the latest market of experts in the history of the school.

However, there are two related moves that need to be stressed. First, the reconfiguration of the state as a result of techniques associated with New Public Management and subsequently through the rise of network governance has left governments with new problems concerning how to govern public systems. Part of this reconfiguration has concerned the use of education policy to 'steer at a distance' the work of schools and school systems (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Ball 2012). In particular, school systems around the world have invariably turned to standardised testing to produce data with which schools and individuals can be held to account (Lingard et al. 2016). As Grek (2013) argues, this shift has generated a specific form of technical expertise, largely psychometric, in organisations like the OECD 'for the construction of a space of equivalence, where policy objectives can now be shared and where improvement of performance is achieved through constant comparison', which 'bring together and effectively steer debate towards predetermined decisions' (p. 706). These shifts have inspired the proliferation of multiple policy actors (including think tanks and edu-businesses) that reside outside organisations like the OECD, but which closely align their work with the OECD's mission and the logics of large-scale testing. In doing so, these groups collectively work to collapse knowledge and policy in what Grek (2013) describes as a new

> …fusion of the two realms in such a conscious and strategic manner that raises very interesting questions regarding the extent of the technicisation and depoliticisation of education problems … almost a new reality where knowledge is policy—it becomes policy, since expertise and the selling of undisputed, universal policy solutions drift into one single entity and function. (pp. 706–707).

Edu-businesses, in particular, have capitalised on these new conditions of possibility by aligning products with the new requirements of large-scale testing and

big data (Anagnostopoulos et al. 2013). Many psychometricians, for example, now work for edu-businesses involved in test construction and associated forms of analysis. Think tanks also engage with this new field of expertise in interesting ways, operating across multiple fields in doing so. Medvetz's categorisation of think tanks as 'boundary organisations' (see above) is useful in this regard. As boundary organisations, think tanks are positioned at the edge of various legitimacies and practices of authorisation, and work within the competing logics of practice of different fields. In doing so, however, they manage to operate as 'highly visible players on the policy scene, issuing studies aimed at politicians and the wider public, hosting symposia, press conferences, and political speeches, and offering a 'government in exile' for sidelined officials awaiting a return to public office' (Medvetz 2012, p. 118). Several papers in this issue examine the implications of think tank or edu-business involvement in relation to shifts towards large-scale testing, standardisation and big data (see Gillis et al. 2015; Loughland and Thompson 2015; Savage 2015; Lingard 2015; Hogan 2015).

A second critical aspect of the think tank/edu-business story in Australia concerns the rise of new forms of expertise, located outside the traditional institutions of educational expertise, such as government bureaucracies, schools and academia. An increasingly broad 'market of ideas' for debating policy problems has emerged, which is driven in significant ways by new media technologies, which allow for the rapid dissemination of ideas. The expanding market of ideas has also been driven by trends towards 'policy contestability', whereby public servants are encouraged to have policies shaped by actors, expertise and ideas external to the traditional confines of the bureaucracy. In many cases, however, the ideas and expertise that gain the most exposure in the contemporary are those that align with market-based productivity agendas, structured in relation to big data, and aligned with what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) describe as 'the neoliberal imaginary'. As such, expertise that tends to gain the most policy traction is that which aligns with fields and sub-fields that speak to notions of productivity, efficiency and technical questions of 'what works' within the umbrella of the human sciences. This 'what works' philosophy (see Loughland and Thompson 2015) is central to the conditions of fast policy making (Peck and Theodore 2015) and opens the policy space to think tank and edu-business influence. Qualifications in economics, psychology, quantitative measurement and psychometrics are particularly favourable it appears. This fact is linked to what has been described as the new neo-positivism underpinning policy as numbers (Lather 2013). Less evident in the contemporary are ideas and approaches that align with social democratic values, and which foreground notions like educational justice (Lingard et al. 2014).

A key aspect to consider in the contemporary market of ideas is the ways that individuals and organisations work to position themselves within media cycles. We see the mediatisation of the policy cycle (Lingard and Rawolle 2004). Expertise is assumed through mediated contexts, and the best way to become an expert is to assume the right to comment. There is a corollary to this, as:

> These individuals represent a new chronotope of policy, as people who 'get things done'—they bring passion, drive and dynamism and a new and

> different kind of expertise to the tackling of social problems. In all this policy is made businesslike and apparently depoliticised. That is, policy becomes subject to the supposed qualities of business, efficiency and cost-effectiveness in particular. The focus is as much on the method of policy as it is the substance, and the values of enterprise and entrepreneurship, carried through these networks into policy, are taken to be uncontestable and politically neutral. (Ball 2008, p. 758)

Concurrently, these new policy actors benefit from a diffusion of traditional power structures within policy networks and a continued blurring of the lines between public and private interests. The papers by Reid (2015) and Lingard (2015) illustrate this well.

Influence

The rising prominence of think tanks in Australian education policy raises important questions about the nature and scope of think tank *influence*. Tracking the influence of any organisation in any policy ecology is notoriously difficult (Weaver-Hightower 2008), as evidenced by a proliferation of attempts in recent years to map and problematize relationships and channels of influence in evolving policy networks (e.g., Ball and Junemann 2012). Indeed, seeking to understand the ways think tanks exert influence is not only complicated by the challenge of defining think tanks, but also by the blurring of relationships between think tanks and other policy actors such as universities, governments, private donors, philanthropies, media outlets, politicians, and many more. It is often impossible to track where exactly think tank influence begins and ends. There is also the added complexity here of how one measures influence, when some think tanks have as their purpose changing the assumptive worlds of the public, politicians and policy makers, rather than directly affecting specific pieces of legislation.

Nevertheless, it is crucially important to *attempt* to explore the influence of think tanks in Australian public policy. This is especially important given recent trends in Australia whereby think tanks have not only exerted more prominence, but leading members of Australian think tanks have also managed to gain ‘insider access’ to the political process. For example, Dr Jennifer Buckingham, Research Fellow in the Education Program at the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), was recently appointed as a Director on the board of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), and Professor Steven Schwartz, Senior Fellow at the CIS, was recently appointed Chair of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). In drawing attention to these connections, we are not suggesting these interrelationships are necessarily negative or inappropriate. Nor are we pretending, as policy researchers, that we sit neatly outside of these policy networks (we also engage as policy actors in our own policy networks). Rather, we feel it is necessary to draw attention to the ways certain policy actors operate through and within powerful policy networks, in order to pose questions about the potential influences that such interrelationships produce. For example, to what extent do policy actors such as Buckingham and Schwartz carry within them ideas

and rationalities from one organisational field to another? Surely we would be profoundly naive to believe that the think tank associated work these policy actors do is entirely insulated from work they do in government. We would also be naïve to believe that the think tank associated work these policy actors do was entirely unconnected from their invitations to serve on policy boards in the first place. Again, our key issue here is not about whether these policy actors should or should not hold such positions. Instead, we are seeking to generate debate about the ways that actors and relationships within Australian education policy interact to legitimise certain policy ideas and practices, rather than others. Because these relationships exist and have power over shaping the nature of public policy, they require critical analysis by policy researchers (see Lingard on CIS in 2015). Failing to draw critical attention to the role of such actors would result in a failure of research to effectively explore the nature of influence in contemporary policy networks.

One of the most interesting aspects of exploring Australian think tank 'influence' is to consider how trends in Australia relate to international examples, particularly in the USA, where the role and influence of think tanks is more developed and has been considered by researchers to a much greater extent. In our view, Australia shows signs of moving in some similar directions to the USA in terms of think tank development and influence. For this reason, we were keen to include American perspectives in the special issue. Savage (2015) and Lubienski and colleagues (2015) provide insights into related developments in the USA. Savage's paper, for example, examines the role that three powerful American think tanks (the Hunt Institute, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the Foundation for Excellence in Education) have played in supporting the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative, a national set of standards in numeracy and literacy that have been adopted by nearly all US states. As Savage demonstrates, each of these think tanks has been financially backed by philanthropic funding provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (a central player in developing and financing the CCSS since its inception), and has worked in sophisticated ways to generate pro-CCSS research and materials, and to advocate for the reform across the nation. Savage suggests a kind of harmony (or hegemony) at work in terms of the political rationalities and technologies that emerge out of the powerful policy networks in which think tanks play a central role. This point is also central to the paper by Lubienski and colleagues, who explore the ways that American think tanks and venture philanthropists connect in processes of 'idea orchestration' to promote specific ideas, and provide legitimacy to positions endorsed by venture philanthropists. In doing so, the authors raise important questions about relationships between the political interests of wealthy philanthropists and the kinds of research produced by think tanks that rely to a large extent on philanthropic funding to ensure their survival in a competitive think tank market.

These papers support Reckhow's (2013) argument that powerful think tanks and non-government organisations increasingly represent a 'shadow bureaucracy' with significant reach and influence amongst governments and appointed officials. Reckhow's work questions how 'public' policy is developed and legitimized through new policy networks that blur distinctions between the public and private. This issue is heightened given the demonstrated ability of many leading think tanks

to influence public opinion through fine-tuned media and communication strategies, which allow them to 'play' the 24-h media cycle in ways that other experts (especially academics) appear unable to do. As journalist Mike Seccombe (2014) noted, in the 12 months up to June 2013, the Australian think tank the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) achieved 878 mentions in print and online. The IPA had 164 articles published in national media, managed 540 radio appearances and mentions, as well as 210 appearances and mentions on TV. In many cases, therefore, think tanks are doing a much better job than academics or other experts in getting *their message* and *their evidence* across to the Australian public. Of course, media work for academics will always be impacted by teaching and research commitments, unlike think tanks where media work is perhaps the most integral part of their activity. This demonstrates the complex ways that issues of expertise, evidence and influence intersect. The same is true of edu-businesses to some extent. Pearson, for example, assert that one of its strategic goals is to help constitute a global education policy consensus and maintain sophisticated communication strategies to achieve this goal (Hogan et al. 2015)

Ultimately, questions about the influence of think tanks and edu-businesses lead us towards questioning the changing role of elite actors in policy processes, and the relationships amongst these elites. This, in turn, provokes complex questions about the changing nature of democracy and the extent to which the growing influence of new policy actors threatens or strengthens the foundations of democracy (see Savage 2015). Medvetz (2012), for example, concludes his book on American think tanks with a provocative question: 'Put simply, should money and political power direct ideas, or should ideas direct themselves?' (p. 226). These are central questions that policy researchers and the broader public must address as Australian think tanks and edu-businesses expand their reach into education policy, particularly those moves by Pearson amongst others, to establish a global educational policy consensus, without any democratic political constituency at all (Hogan et al. 2015).

In closing

We hope that this special issue serves as a catalyst to deepen critical conversations and analyses of the changing role of think tanks and edu-businesses in Australian education policy. If we were to typify the focus of this special issue in one sentence, it would be a call for a renewed focus on the politics of education policy in Australia that would include critical engagement with think tanks and edu-businesses as new policy actors. This focus should include specific attention to the ideas that are prominent, the quality of promoted research, and the sophisticated media strategies being utilised. As such, this special issue is put forward as a provocation to future research and deconstruction of the enhanced role of think tanks and edu-businesses in education policy making in Australia, as a vernacular expression of a global trend in education policy. The next move in education policy towards big data will further open up these spaces in network governance and new modes of education policy production for edu-businesses. There is much for educational researchers to do here.

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